

# Annual Political Book Award

*The Washington Monthly* wishes to recognize the best of those books that explore the processes and values of the institutions that govern America, the books that share our purpose of identifying where the system breaks down, why it breaks down, and what can be done to make it work.

**FIRE IN  
THE LAKE**  
THE VIETNAMESE AND  
THE AMERICANS IN  
VIETNAM

FRANCES FITZGERALD

**DANIEL  
ELLSBERG**



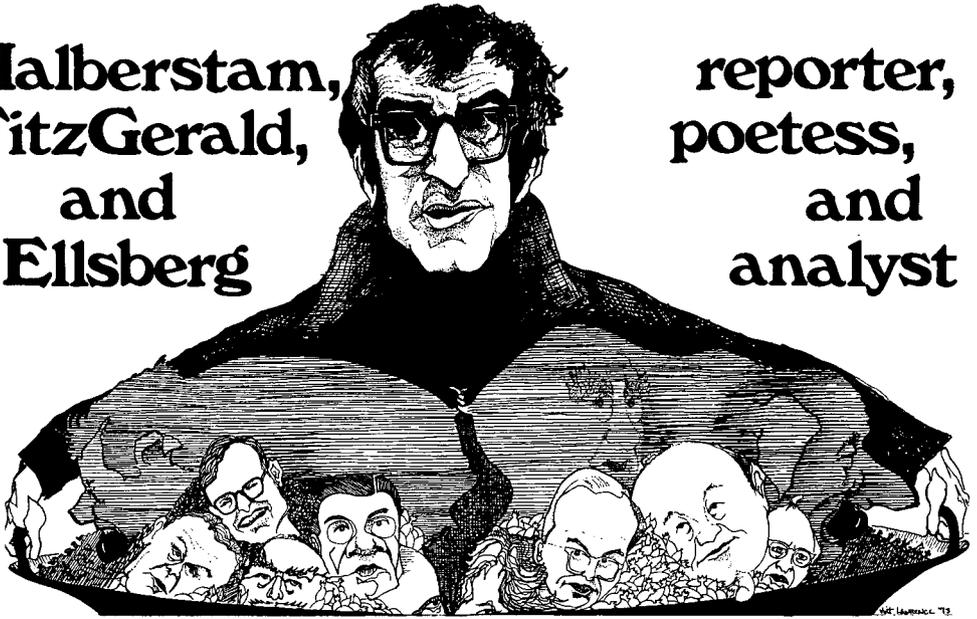
**PAPERS  
ON THE  
WAR**

\$4.95

The award for 1972 goes to  
*Fire in the Lake*  
by Frances FitzGerald  
and  
*Papers on the War*  
by Daniel Ellsberg

Halberstam,  
FitzGerald,  
and  
Ellsberg

reporter,  
poetess,  
and  
analyst



by Taylor Branch

With a nervous eye on Nixon's trigger finger, we watch the prisoners and the bombers return as the Vietnam aftermath tentatively begins. The aftermath will witness the first efforts to understand the long war in stillness, without its battle noises and rhetorical hogwash ringing in the background, and the flat uncelebration of the cease-fire is a sign that such understanding is still needed. It is not clear whether we will profit from looking back on the bloody stalemate in Vietnam any more than we learned from other anti-communist interventions, such as the consummate failure at the Bay of Pigs or the tidy success in the Dominican Republic. But the stakes are higher now, and, incredibly, books on Vietnam still sell.

Three major reflective books on the war appeared last year. The authors, sensing the public's boredom with political tracts exhorting us out of Vietnam in one way or another, treated the war almost as if it were over. In *The Best and the Brightest*,\* David Halberstam speaks as the literate reporter looking back at the war's early years through the sherry

glasses and drawing rooms of the nation's great foreign policy managers—McNamara, the Bundys, Rusk, Harriman, JFK, LBJ, Maxwell Taylor, and so on. He finds that the culture of the national security specialists drew them into Vietnam through a combination of hubris and stupidity—like getting stuck to a tar baby, his favorite image of their entanglement. Frances FitzGerald speaks as poetess in *Fire in the Lake*.\* She cradles her knowledge of Vietnam in her arms as she explains how the American war dollar shredded up the delicate tissue of Vietnamese culture. By focusing resolutely on what happened in Vietnam (as opposed to Kissinger's brief case or Fulbright's hearings or Johnson's pancreas), FitzGerald produced what I think is the best single volume yet written on Vietnam. Finally, Daniel Ellsberg speaks as prophet in his *Papers on the War*.\* His is a book of revelations, to and from himself, and it is remarkable that his incandescent spiritual traumas interfere with the brilliance of his writing as little as

\**The Best and the Brightest*. David Halberstam. Random House, \$10. *Fire in the Lake*. Frances FitzGerald. Atlantic-Little, Brown, \$12.95. *Papers on the War*. Daniel Ellsberg. Simon & Schuster, \$2.95.

Taylor Branch is a contributing editor of The Washington Monthly.